



Aspirations & Solutions

Have you ever said to yourself, “If this person only knew how bad things really were out there, they would want to act, like I do?” All too often as advocates, we tell a crisis story about just how bad things are in the areas we focus on, hoping that it will motivate people to get involved or to work harder.

The good news is that cognitive science research shows us that making the solution known and seemingly achievable can help motivate people to get involved. Simple changes help communicate need more effectively and motivate people to action. Success and interest depend on making the shift towards solutions, rather than telling a crisis story. Research shows that telling a crisis story can often overwhelm people and send them in search of an unproductive solution, or make them believe the problem is unsolvable. As advocates, talking about the solutions we have to the problems we face will motivate people to action.

Background

Have you ever thought to yourself, “If people only knew how bad this situation was, they would feel compelled to act?” That people would understand how urgent the problem was, and be motivated to get involved? As advocates, we often focus most of our communications trying to tell people a story of how big and how urgent the problem is.

Cognitive science research shows us that focusing only on the problem can make it seem unsolvable or too big. When that happens, people are much more likely to dismiss it as one more problem they can’t solve. When a problem seems intractable, people are less likely to be motivated to get involved or to take action. After all, if the problem is unsolvable, what’s the point?

The good news is that there is a way to motivate people to action. By sharing solutions and showing how we can solve the problem together, we will motivate people to act. As advocates, we get to tell people about how we’d like to solve these problems and the solutions we make real through our work. We know we can solve these problems — we can build affordable housing, we can increase funding for emergency rent assistance, and we can help families get back on their feet. So it’s time to tell people about our solutions!

Questions to Ask Yourself

Read something you've written lately, like an action alert, legislative testimony, or a piece for an elected official. Highlight or underline every sentence that talks about the problem. How much of your communication is about the problem or the need? How much of your communication is about the solution you're proposing?

Examples:

Before: Today, we have over 20,000 kids who've experienced homelessness during the last school year. We have a huge shortage of affordable housing here in our state, which means kids and families end up sleeping in cars and in homeless shelters. Kids go to school hungry, and aren't ready to learn. Parents have a hard time keeping their jobs. There simply aren't enough affordable places to rent in our communities — in fact, there are only two affordable and available apartments for every family that needs it. We must continue to build more affordable housing if we're ever going to meet half the need.

After: Today, too many of the children and families living in our communities don't have a safe, stable or affordable place to call home. Last year, over 20,000 school kids experienced homelessness at some point during the year. That's almost one child for every classroom in the state. Kids deserve the opportunity and safety that having a place to call home provides. We can solve this problem — we know how to help families end or prevent their homelessness and return to stable housing. Housing provides opportunity for kids and families — kids are healthier and get to school ready to learn, and parents are able to focus on work. By passing this bill, we will increase funding for affordable housing, and make sure more kids and families in our state have a safe, stable place to call home. Please call your elected official today, and ask them for their support.

Next Steps

The next time you write a letter to the editor, or a piece for a legislator, or a newsletter, be sure to balance your problem and solution. Check your work. Is the solution clear? Does it seem attainable? Have you spent more time talking about the solution than the problem? Good! Try using this formula:

- › Spend 5 of your time on what's wrong, what's the need.
- › Spend 15 of your time talking about why it matters (see: Values).
- › Spend 80 of your time talking about the solution you're proposing.

Exercises

- › Try writing one or two brief sentences about the problem. Be succinct, use one or two compelling facts (see: Facts & Metaphors), and try not to overwhelm the listener with the problem. Write a sentence about why it matters (see: Values). Next, try writing four sentences about the solution. What is it? How do we get there? What do we need to achieve our goals?
- › Here are some ways to start out talking about solutions: "We know what works..." "There is a tested solution for this problem..." Or "We can solve this problem..."
- › Try it out. Find a neighbor or family member and read them your sentences about the solution – what do they think? Does the problem seem solvable? Would they get involved? Do they seem more engaged in the conversation?
- › Is there a clear, time specific action that your listener can take?

Hint: Your problem and solution need to be balanced; the problem can't be thousands and thousands of people who need affordable homes if the solution is one new affordable housing project with ten units. Your audience needs to feel like the solution you're proposing will get us closer to solving the problem you've articulated.

More Resources

"Dire Messages about Global Warming Can Backfire, New Study Shows:" http://newscenter.berkeley.edu/2010/11/16/globalwarming_messaging/